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Chile, the CIA and Kissinger

To go barking after the CIA because of its secret operations in Chile is beside the point. The agency, in subverting the late Socialist President Salvador Allende, was carrying out established national policy — White House policy. The CIA's director, William Colby, who was in the position of reporting to Congress about actions taken under earlier directors, deserves praise for his candor.

The real need is to fathom why Henry Kissinger, then (1970-73) Mr. Nixon's national security adviser, felt it was essential to get rid of one particular leader of a country which, by its region, size and general importance, plays almost no part in the global balance of power, on which Kissinger's strategy supposedly is based.

Interestingly, Allende and Chile are not mentioned once in the absorbing new book, "Kissinger," by Bernard and Marvin Kalb. The only public clue to his thinking is pretty insubstantial. An Allende "takeover," Kissinger said in 1970 of Allende's electoral victory, could produce over time "some sort of Communist government" which could pose "massive problems for us, and for democratic forces and pro-U.S. forces in Latin America."

What were those "massive problems" which the United States set out to help deter by covert means?

No doubt Kissinger and Nixon wanted, if possible, to limit leftist movements throughout Latin America: "No more Cubas." But in view of Washington's moves then toward Moscow, and its tentative move now toward Havana, this hardly seems an adequate rationale.

Nor can a very persuasive case be made that the defense of the United States' then-embattled corporate interests in Chile — and by extension, else-

where in the third world — required measures so extreme. You have to be a Marxist, or to think Kissinger and Nixon were pretty stupid, to believe that was a dominant factor.

For what it's worth, I suspect Kissinger feared that the example of a successful popular front government in Chile — Communists and Socialists working together — might have a contagious effect in France and Italy and other places where, in the 1970s, popular fronts have a real chance of coming to power. Kissinger voiced this fear in discussing his Chile policy privately at the time.

The election of a Socialist-Communist coalition in Chile had, after all, aroused global attention. Communist parties were widely being made respectable, in part by the example of Richard Nixon in dealing with Moscow and Peking. Their "natural" political partners were and are the democratic socialist parties of the left. It was not far-fetched — not then, not now — to imagine popular fronts taking power and, degree by degree, removing their countries from the "West," as the area of postwar American dominance is commonly known.

It is suggestive that CIA Director Colby apparently ranked the Chile operation in importance with postwar Greece and Guatemala and described it as a "prototype" for bringing foreign governments down with money. In postwar Greece, the United States helped Athens defeat a Communist insurgency launched across a national frontier. In Guatemala in 1954, the CIA sponsored a military coup against a Communist government. In Chile it provided financial support to help local elements thwart an elected Marxist who was expected to take Chile toward communism by a parliamentary route.

Kissinger, using wit as a cloak, has quipped that Chile is "a dagger pointed at the heart of Antarctica." His implication: How can anyone think he was uptight about Chile? But perhaps he was uptight about Chile.

Temperamentally, what Kissinger seems to fear most in the current international scene is the flux, the uncertainty, the difficulty of convincing the American public to deal with international challenges less evident — but in his mind, hardly less ominous — than military attack.

Kissinger is a child of Weimar Germany: He has seen democracy destroyed. He has some of the European intellectual's characteristic ambivalence about popular democracy, for whose putative weaknesses he at tempts to compensate by diplomatic manipulation, elitism, secrecy, personal virtuosity. This is of a piece with his scarcely concealed contempt for Europe's cravenness — an attitude of which the public saw traces after the Mideast war last year.

It is the conventional wisdom that Vietnam taught the United States that it could no longer play the "policeman" of the world. But perhaps it taught Kissinger, whose view of his tory is long and dark and extend much beyond Vietnam, that the United States must play the policeman in a particular way — a way that fends off feared foreign dangers but does not bring down the domestic public's wrath on the government's or one's own head.

There is something undeniably valiant about Kissinger's purposes, but there can be something undeniably vicious about his means. Is there no other way for the values and the interests of the United States to thrive?